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SUBJECT: CASUALTY FIGURES IN SOUTH OSSETIA VARY, STILL
UNKNOWN

¶1. (SBU) Summary. In the aftermath of active fighting in South Ossetia, numerous leaders and agencies from Russia, Georgia, the United States, international agencies, and the self-proclaimed South Ossetian government have reported varying death toll figures. While there is no consensus, published figures from the Russian and so-called South Ossetian governments vastly exceed those from the U.S., Georgia, and human rights agencies. Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner Thomas Hammarberg stated in an Interfax press conference on August 29 that the number of casualties, while still unknown and undeterminable, exceeds figures quoted by international organizations. End Summary.

Civilian Deaths

¶2. (SBU) Since August 8, civilian casualty estimates cited publicly by Russian and foreign officials in South Ossetia have ranged from 44 to over 2,000; however, Russian and South Ossetian figures are all 1,000 or higher. South Ossetia's Prosecutor General's Office proclaimed on August 29 that exactly 1,692 people were killed, but ventured that only 1,500 were injured in the Georgian conflict, a figure slightly lower than that cited by South Ossetian President Eduard Kokoity. On August 25, Kokoity claimed that 2,000 civilians died in the conflict. Yet, on August 22, Chief of the South Ossetian Press and Information Committee Irina Gagloyeva stated that 1,492 civilians died in South Ossetia. Russian Federation Council Speaker Sergei Mironov declared on August 25 that approximately 1,000 South Ossetian citizens perished in the conflict. The lowest figure from the Russian side came on August 20 from Deputy Chairman of the Investigations Committee of the Russian Prosecutor General's Office Boris Salmakov who totaled known South Ossetian casualties at 133.

¶3. (SBU) Calling the situation a humanitarian catastrophe but not genocide, Hammarberg in an August 29 press conference discouraged the publication of casualty numbers, positing that it is too difficult to know exact figures at this stage (Note: Hammarberg made a similar statement on August 23). In an August 27 meeting with the Ambassador, Russian Human Rights Ombudsman Vladimir Lukin also refused to estimate casualty figures and to call events in South Ossetia "genocide." In Hammarberg's August 29 meeting with Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov, he noted that some people had been buried quickly in family gardens to prevent an epidemic, and the possibility of more buried civilians complicated casualty estimates. At the same time, Hammarberg said the death toll was higher than that reported by some international organizations. On August 14, Human Rights Watch Moscow Deputy Director Tanya Lokshina stated that the Tshkinvali city hospital reported 44 civilian deaths. The Washington Post printed the same figure for Tshkinvali on August 25, also noting figures from hospitals in Tbilisi (70) and Gori (64). Georgia-based Kavkaz Press reported 25 deaths in Gori on August 25. In wild contrast, Russian military experts estimated Georgia's death toll at 4,000 on August 15.

Military Deaths

¶4. (SBU) While the precise count for Russian military deaths has varied since the outbreak of violence, the majority of officials reported fewer than 70 deaths. On August 24, Russian military officials tallied 64 deceased military personnel, a figure supported by Russian Colonel-General Anatoly Novogitsyn on August 20. Russian daily Komsomolskaya Pravda reported 51 Russian military deaths on August 18 while Rossiya TV reported over 70 Russian military deaths on August ¶15. Russian officials stated on August 25 that approximately 200 Georgian soldiers died in the fighting, with another 150-180 Georgian soldiers still missing.

Comment

¶5. (SBU) Despite numerous reports from government officials, human rights watchdogs, and press outlets in South Ossetia, there is not a consistent estimate, much less a precise number, of casualties.

BEYRLE